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REMBRANDT.

BY JOSEF ISRAËLS.



REMBRANDT

To the abundance of literature, at present piled up under the above title, I may be allowed to contribute this offering in honor of the great master.

It is over fifty years ago when, as an art student, I journeyed to Amsterdam to place myself under the instruction of Kruseman, then a very renowned portrait painter. Soon I was admitted to his studio and admired greatly the portraits of prominent Amsterdam people which he was painting. The pinkish color of the faces, and the fine execution of the garments, sometimes against a background of dark red velvet, interested me greatly.

When, however, I expressed a desire to copy some of these portraits, I was not allowed to do this—"no," was the master's

reply, "if you want to copy, go to the Trippenhuis."*

I did not dare to express my disappointment. Just arrived from the provinces, the old masters were still hidden to me. I could not discover the beauty of those old scenes and dark canvases about which people raved. I much preferred the exhibitions in *Arti*, and I admired especially Pieneman, Gallait, Calame and Koekoek. It was not because I was so very much behind others, but I lacked the study and practice which are indispensable to understand the unusual and highly artistic qualities of the Dutch Masters. I contend that no matter how cultured one may be, he will not be able to enjoy those grand old men without long and frequent study. Art appreciation must be trained to enter thoroly into the character and depth of these art expressions.

It took a long time before I had the courage to enter that Sanctum with paint and brushes. But a light appeared to me after I had been painting for some time from nature, indoors and out in the country, and had made many studies from the nude and many more stillives. I commenced to understand that the aim should not be the pleasingly soft handling in the painting, but that I had to pay most attention to the *relievo* of objects, the relation of the figures to *chiaroscuro*, their action and movement.

With this point of view I went with far greater pleasure to the Trippenhuis, and gradually I discovered the beauty and wealth of expression in these old masters.

Not knowing much of technique, I tried at first to copy a little "Hermit" by Gerard Dou, in which I was not very successful. Then I tried a head by Van der Helst, which went better. At last I stood before one of the heads of the "Syndics"—the one in the left corner with the pointed hat on his gray hair captivated me.

*The "Trippenhuis" was a museum on the Kloveniersburgwal in Amsterdam, where a private collection was housed that had been left to the State. When the Ryksmuseum was completed, some twenty years ago, this collection and other collections, as the Van der Hoop, were brought to the new building.

Thus I tried from various artists to catch their color scheme and technique, until the beauties of the "Nightwatch" and the "Syndics" overpowered me to that extent that nothing attracted me except what had come from the hand of the great master, the only Rembrandt.

Something I saw in his work that I could not see in any other—his freedom and exuberance, which were so precious to me, but were not tolerated at the Academy or the teacher's studio. And even tho Frans Hals impressed me most for his brush handling—it was Rembrandt who added thereto his color and light effects, and who stood first.

For quite a while I had been studying Rembrandt's paintings from every point of view, when one day I wandered downstairs in the museum to the so-called print room. Here were kept Rembrandt's etchings in excellent states.

It was an attractive room having a view on a garden; a long, green cloth covered table was there to spread out the portfolios containing those treasures. And there I sat, often and long, engrossed in these two hundred and forty art works, and the curator did not cease urging me to be careful when I would be mixing these sheets to compare them one with the other.

How surprised I was to find the artist, who upstairs had wrought in oil the glorious "Nightwatch" and the broad "Syndics"—to find him here as an engraver *par excellence*, not only endowed with the force and breadth of a first-class brush handler, but also thoroly at home in whatever the needle could accomplish on the hard, shining copper.

But these etchings did not alone impress me so much because of their extraordinary dexterity—I was especially charmed by the ingenuity of the compositions, the wonderful light effects, and the naive, childlike actions wherewith he endowed his figures. So wonderful, original and so exact in expression were these scenes, that other prints, no matter how clever, still looked academic and puerile by comparison. There were excellent portraits, rarely beautiful head, now of himself, then again of his friends. But when one has seen the little portrait of his mother, one should close the portfolio a moment . . . and wipe his eyes. Nothing more beautiful can be found than the deep feeling of this engraving. The motherly gentleness, the tenderness and thoughtfulness of the dear little woman are in every line, every scratch of the needle. They all mean something, not a touch could be left out.

And yet there was a third expression of Rembrandt's talent—his drawings. These drawings were highly problematical, and yet encouraging to a young artist who was looking for means to express himself. They were less comprehensibly clear than his etchings, and it was some time before they satisfied me, but I understood—what I still think to be the case—that the master never intended to have these drawings neatly framed and exhibited. Then I caught their meaning. They were mostly soul-expressions to aid his richly imaginative mind. Thoughtlessly thrown on the paper they were—yet, with a hand that created masterpieces with every inspiration, every sentiment.

Superficially examined, they are spoiled by all kinds of inkstains and hard, thick lines, which cross each other wildly and strangely. But when you come to look carefully, it is all well thought out, a feeling for light and brown, the compositions are big, full of acting figures, buildings, landscapes—everything has an insistent pictorial sentiment.

II.

And how do I now think of the master, after so many decades have passed away?

Come with me and view the greatest expression of Rembrandt's art, which he has given us in his "Nightwatch."*

At the first glance we are at once struck by the broad movements of shadows and light which, like color-sounds, sing thru the enormous canvas.

Then, at once, two men come to you, as they step out of the group. One is entirely dark, the other dressed in a light costume. That is Rembrandt! unabashed to contrast sharp light against the black. And to harmonize this contrast of big lines, light against dark, he invents to extend the left arm of the dark man as if with a gesture he seeks to argue something, and so he throws a big sunny half shadow on his white comrade. Genius knows how to help itself, where common people would be at a loss. These two men are apparently in conversation, that is plainly to be seen, they are the leaders of the band.

There he stood, the great master, when all was put on the canvas that should be there—and then he shook his head.

In his opinion these two men did not come quite far enough in the foreground. So he took again his big palette and dipped his broadest brushes once more deep in the pigment and these two foremost figures were once more taken in hand with mighty strokes; here more depth, there more light, and so he tried everything to give a still more clever relief to that which he wanted to bring out. Then he saw that it was good, and so he let them stand.

Mayhap the likeness of the gentlemen that had given the commission was not quite exact, or he might have heard already complaints about a lack of painstaking particularizing—what did he care? the principal object for him was that there was life in it and these men moved. And look, how he succeeded.

From the plumes on their hats to the soles of their shoes, which almost touch the frame—it is all as if you can grasp them. How full of energy and character are those heads, the clothes are moulded to the bodies, the steel neckguard, the sash, the boots of the white man—they all have marvelous painter's quality. Then the black one, with the red bandoleer, with the glove and the cane—it is a combination which does not strike you, because it is so true, so simple, so natural. I know of no representation which shows stronger the abandon and picturesqueness of those times than these two men, passing along on this enormous canvas.

Then we turn to the righthand side of the painting to observe this perspiring drummer. His apparently pock-marked face under the shadow of a worn-out hat is a true Falstaff figure; his thick, bibulous nose, his fat lips—everything about him is a true artist's bravura, that bespeaks the master's daring. Look, how he is drumming away, as if he wants to announce that he is one of the most magnificent creations of the famous artist, called Rembrandt.

I can understand that, seeing this man as he sails along, the narrow, dilettante and punctilious critic Gérard de Lairese exclaims in his big book on art: "With Rembrandt the pigment runs like dirt over the frame."

Snobbery and genius will always be at odds.

But we turn now once more to the left of the scene. Look, there stands the clever arquebusier, entirely dressed in red. Rembrandt with his talent for chiaroscuro, was not afraid to present someone entirely in red, for he knew that the play of light and shade would help. The red is, therefore, here partly in a shadow of delicious nuances and combines exquisitely with the gray-green tones of the other figures. This red man

*For a reproduction of the "Nightwatch," see the September number.

also has had the brushing of which I have spoken. Look at him closely, and it seems as if this picturesque advancing man has been put on his feet with one full brush, from top to bottom with one big stroke. And he stands there quick, lively, moving—rich.

In this wonderful painting you find every moment something startling. That pikeman on the left talks, then see the man who is examining his gun, and how beautifully that laughing boy with his gray hat stands out against the background. Even the gray pillar, against which you see that helmet, is so rightly in place for the ensemble.

And still there is something wonderful: that strange little girl running around among all these men.

So many critics and writers have split their heads on the question, what the artist really meant and whether she ought to have been there. But if Rembrandt had heard them, he would have answered smilingly: Don't you see that I needed that light-bearing child there as a foil against all those lines running down and those dark colors?

And since you are here now, you must not take it ill if we should look around a little—of course, for the "Syndics." There it hangs, that grand simple masterpiece—and what a different note it sounds from the music of the "Nightwatch."

All is so quiet and serene, and only the supreme conception of the human countenance holds sway. There they sit, those old Dutch men of affairs consulting, with the guild books on the table, and Rembrandt has interpreted those heads so lifelike that in the course of time they have become old acquaintances.

Old acquaintances—who lived a few hundred years before us. They are all painted with such force, such brilliancy, such life. I don't know whether much was written or talked about this picture when it was finished—but as for me, who has seen and admired so much art of the great Italians, the old Germans and the Spaniards, for me these heads are the supreme expression to which the art of painting may reach.

Yes! do you know that this painting kills the work of the old Dutch brethren? Clever Van der Helst becomes superficial, graceful Frans Hals becomes sketchy and transparent—so much solidity and relief with so much naturalness of pose and action, as seen in the Syndics, is no longer to be found. These people have been living on that canvas for a couple of hundred years, and will survive us a long time.

And the man who did this masterpiece was a poor citizen who lived in a miserable quarter of the city where they have just now been celebrating!

III.

But those sad thoughts which arise so often when we rehearse the lives of those of whom humanity is proud, have no place here.

On the contrary—conditions have changed.

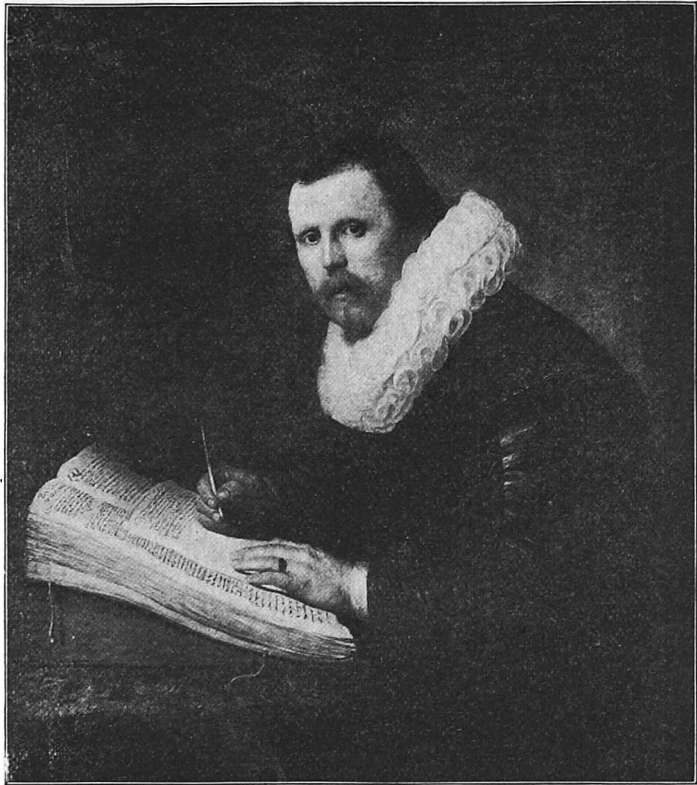
Never has Rembrandt's art been exalted as it is now. Archives and documents are searched to discover all that can be known of him, even aside of his work—his whole life is to be investigated, so that we may sympathize with all his success and his many disappointments.

Rembrandt stands now at the zenith of his glory. It is remarkable that none of the acknowledged masters of painting in the course of time has been so severely criticized as Rembrandt has been. And yet, despite all that has been said of the improbability of the scene and the exaggeration of the dark background—still the "Nightwatch" remains what it has been from the beginning: "the world's wonder."

During Rembrandt's life he had, especially in his later years, to hear many bickerings because he didn't follow the ancients or learned from

the Italians. It is fortunate that he always was strong enough to follow his own bent. For many years after his death, several writers used to cavil about the dangerous theories which were suggested by his technique—they were not able to comprehend the depth of his meaning. It is different now. Books and pamphlets have appeared in the last fifty years, and they all breathe nothing but enthusiasm and admiration. Yes, and we are liberal enough to ascribe his apparent shortcomings and excesses to the peculiarities of an extraordinary personality.

And thus I close, thinking of the portrait of Jan Six, that rare jewel; thinking of the Louvre, Cassel, Brunswick—but enough. These pages only show what Rembrandt always has been to me. They portray the artist, free and untrammelled in his work, genial in all he did, a man who mirrors the grandeur of our old republic.



REMBRANDT

SUPPOSED PORTRAIT OF COPPENOF

*Courtesy of
Berlin Photo Co.*

Though America has lost one of its choicest Rembrandts—the lovely “Petronella Buys,” which was bought out of the country at the recent Joseph Jefferson sale—it has gained another through the wise choice of one of its citizens. Mr. Frank C. Logan of Chicago has bought and brought from Amsterdam a picture called “Rembrandt in a Steel Gorget, with a Feather in His Cap,” which is one of the painter’s best-known portraits of himself. It is now on exhibition in the Chicago Art Institute.